

# THE OLIE WE KNEW



MANY MYTHS HAVE  
GROWN UP AROUND  
OLIVER NORTH: RAMBO,  
THE COWBOY, ALMOST  
THE PRESIDENT'S SON.  
HERE'S WHAT HE REALLY  
DID, AND WHY HE DID IT.

BY DAVID HALEVY AND  
NEIL C. LIVINGSTONE

In late 1984, in the ornate Indian Treaty Room of the Old Executive Office Building, a young Marine officer's family and friends were gathered for a ceremony in honor of his promotion from the rank of major to lieutenant colonel. The President's national-security adviser, Robert C. "Bud" McFarlane, himself a former Marine lieutenant colonel, performed the ritual and pinned the silver oak-leaf insignia on the officer's shoulders. McFarlane administered the oath from memory and followed it with comments appropriate to the occasion. "It would not be unusual," said McFarlane, "if Colonel North awakes one day to carry the same responsibilities that I carry right now."

Today Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North's career is in shambles, and any suggestion that he would one day become national-security adviser to the President seems strange. But back in 1984 he was a man on the rise, the President's "fair-haired boy." Nothing seemed impossible.

Marine Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, known as Ollie, burst into the national consciousness on November 25, 1986, in the wake of revelations concerning the Iran arms deal and covert efforts to aid the *contras* battling the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. A man with an intense, magnetic personality and riveting blue eyes, he looked as though he had stepped out of a Marine Corps recruiting poster. Perhaps that is why it was hard for many to believe that he had been anything other than a good soldier following his commander-in-chief's orders, and not some kind of sinister operator pursuing a private foreign-policy agenda from his cluttered office in the Old Executive Office Building adjacent to the White House. Indeed, on the day North was fired from his position on the National Security Council, the President described him as a "national hero."

A man of action, North became President Reagan's "Rambo," a characteri-

zation he disliked, and in the six years he served on the National Security Council, he was at the center of the administration's war on terrorism and its efforts to aid anti-communist insurgencies around the world.

Ever on the move, North handled the sharing of intelligence with the British during the Falklands crisis and traveled to Argentina with then-Secretary of State Alexander Haig after the onset of fighting. He frequently went to the Middle East. He swept through the Caribbean on the eve of the US operation in Grenada. He jetted back and forth to Europe when Americans became the target of Abu Nidal's hit teams, and journeyed to Cyprus each time an American hostage was wrenched free from the grip of the Shiite Hizballah. He made a memorable trip to Tehran in pursuit of a doomed policy, bearing a Bible signed by Ronald Reagan and a cake in the shape of a key. Wherever Americans were in trouble, North could be expected to show up. He spent so much time in the air that by 1986 a private jet reportedly stood by, around-the-clock, ready to respond to his summons.

He drew around him a collection of admirers and operatives, including conservative idealists, anti-Castro Cubans, counter-terrorism specialists, ex-spies, and other Marine officers, and they became known as "Ollie's cow-

As a military-affairs correspondent for *Time* magazine, covering terrorism, insurgencies, and intelligence matters, David Halevy first met Oliver North in early 1985 when Halevy was preparing a story on the *contras*.

From that first meeting until North's firing in November 1986, Halevy met with him at least once a week, sometimes twice, often at the McDonald's half a block from the Old Executive Office Building at 17th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue Northwest.

Neil Livingstone, a long-time writer and consultant on terrorism and low-intensity warfare, first met Oliver North in 1983. As he followed the evolution of the Reagan administration's anti-terrorism policies, he became fascinated by the fact that all roads seemed to lead to a little-known lieutenant colonel at the National Security Council

boys." Together they waged the "good fight" against enemies of the United States.

Today North faces criminal prosecution. The Reagan administration is in disarray, and the President is in the position of looking as if he didn't know what was going on in the White House, or, if he did, looking like a liar.

Whether history ultimately regards Ollie North as a scapegoat, a rogue elephant, a national hero, or some combination of all three, it is too early to tell. Whatever the outcome, one thing is certain: Oliver North has, in the words of one congressman, "passed over the great divide into fame."

## THE SHAPING OF OLIVER NORTH

Who is Oliver North, and what were the events that shaped his life and foreshadowed his fame?

He began life in San Antonio, Texas, the eldest of four children born into an Army family. North's parents were strong disciplinarians with high expectations for their four children. From all accounts, Ollie—known in those days as Larry—was a model son, and his formative years were happy ones.

When it came time for college, North won a scholarship to the State University of New York at Brockport. It was there that he joined the on-campus Marine officer-training program and put aside thoughts of becoming a teacher in favor of a career in the military. He transferred to the US Naval Academy after his sophomore year, starting over as a plebe in the class of 1967. An auto accident forced North to start all over again, as a plebe in the class of 1968, his third year of higher education as a freshman.

The class of 1968 was to become one of the most memorable in the recent history of the Naval Academy, not only because of its many outstanding members but because its history was so configured by the Vietnam war—five members of the class would die in Southeast Asia. For those, like North, who served there, Vietnam would be one of the great passages of their lives. During his Marine career, including his years at the White House, Vietnam was always North's reference point, a yardstick by which he measured actions and motives.

He was 25 years old when he graduated from Annapolis, and few doubted that he would go for the Marines when it came time to take his commission. According to the yearbook, "No matter where his career may lead, we know his thoughts will always be of the corps, the



Ollie North in Vietnam in July 1969, just after taking a hill on Mutter's Ridge. As a platoon commander, he was wounded and decorated. But he was also scarred emotionally, upset by military red tape and bureaucrats, and frustrated that the US didn't have the power and determination to win.

corps, and the corps." Upon graduation, he went directly to the Marine Corps officers' school at Quantico, Virginia, and soon found himself in Vietnam in command of a platoon. Although a straight-arrow officer, he was respected and even admired by the men of his platoon.

He saw extensive combat in Vietnam, conducted reconnaissance missions behind enemy lines, and won a Silver Star for valor. He was also wounded at least twice, although he was not in the habit of applying for Purple Hearts.

After he returned to the US, North was hospitalized for ten days in 1974, suffering from delayed battle stress. He was reportedly found by a superior officer talking incoherently while running around naked waving a .45 pistol. Later, as a member of the National Security Council staff, North would only rarely reminisce about his combat experiences, but he would often refer to the lessons of Vietnam. "We can't afford losing," he once said. "We ought to train and operate with only one goal in mind: to win."

Five years after the fall of Vietnam, North would again see American military might come up short—this time in Iran.

North was involved in the attempt to rescue the hostages that left eight American servicemen dead at a makeshift landing strip in the Horasan desert. To North, the "debacle in the desert" was Vietnam all over again—further proof that the nation lacked the will and leadership to succeed in covert military opera-

tions. While on the National Security Council, he often remarked to friends that "the Army can't shoot straight, the Air Force can't fly, and the Navy can't sail."

In the aftermath of Desert One, North became committed to doing everything in his power to restore the nation's ability to "win" militarily. He maintained that the US would never prevail over the Soviet Union unless it got off the defensive. Preserving the status quo was not enough; America must turn the tables on the Soviet Union and its allies and go on the offensive.

While imbued with all this passionate desire to change things, North in 1980 was a major in the Marine Corps and in no position to change the system. One year later it would be different.

## NORTH MOVES IN NEXT DOOR TO THE WHITE HOUSE

After his service in Vietnam, North taught special-warfare courses at Quantico, as well as to the Third Marine Division and the Fifth Special Forces Group based in the Philippines. Following a stint as a plans-and-policy analyst at Marine headquarters, he was sent to the Navy War College in Newport, Rhode Island. There he met John Lehman, who would become Reagan's first Secretary of the Navy. It was Lehman who recommended North to Richard V. Allen. Rea-



Oliver Lawrence North and his wife, Betsy, who calls him Larry, except when she is upset with him—then she calls him Lawrence. Their youngest child, Dornin, on her father's shoulders, broke her arm earlier this year, not long after this picture was taken.

gan's national-security adviser. Allen was impressed with the young Marine officer with the sparkling blue eyes, who seemed to combine the attributes of a tough combat commander with those of an able staff officer.

When the offer came to join the National Security Council, North grabbed at the opportunity with both hands. Finally he would have an impact on things that mattered to him. Within a year, the young Marine major emerged as the National Security Council's chief trouble-shooter and covert-operations specialist, as well as secret emissary for highly sensitive missions. He quickly grasped the power of information and took on whatever needed to be done, quickly making himself indispensable.

To prepare himself for the 7:45 AM NSC staff meeting, North began his workday at dawn, and he could often be found in his office at midnight, even when there was no crisis. His ability to put in eighteen-hour days—sometimes sleeping on the couch across from his desk—gave him an advantage when it came to turning out work.

Reflecting little interest in the trappings of power, North's office, Number

392 on the third floor of the Old Executive Office Building, was a monument to organized chaos. It was small and stuffy, furnished with a desk, couch, and chair, and its walls were covered with maps of Nicaragua, Libya, the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, Beirut, El Salvador, and assorted aerial photos. There had been an oil painting over the couch once, but it had been on loan from the National Gallery of Art to a former occupant and was taken back when it was deemed that North's status did not merit such a piece of art. An old Marine uniform hung on a rack in one corner, and there were small, framed pictures of his wife and children and of President Reagan and three *contra* leaders (with North characteristically in the background).

Taped to the wall behind his desk were drawings and finger-paintings by his children. A Chinese People's Liberation Army fur hat emblazoned with a red star sat on the windowsill. North's desk always seemed to be littered with phones, computer terminals, reports, and paperwork, and when the desk couldn't hold any more, the floor became an extension of its work surface.

Outside North's office in the recep-

tion area, there was a coffee machine that always seemed to be on. Tacked above the machine was a mock movie poster promoting a film entitled *The Return of Walter Mondale*, which promised that the candidate would be "more boring than ever."

The guardian of the door was North's fanatically loyal secretary, Fawn Hall, whose mother served as secretary to national-security adviser Bud McFarlane. In the wake of the Iran-contra revelations, Fawn Hall has provided the "sex angle" to the media, some of whom have portrayed her as little more than a decoration in North's office, a blond airhead who surely had to be "involved" with her boss.

Nothing could be further from the truth. North was aware of the office gossip and frequently joked that "everyone thinks I'm having an affair with Fawn because she's so good-looking." Now and then a White House staffer, hearing of Hall's attractiveness and personality, would find an excuse to visit North's suite just to get a look at her, and maybe even meet her. But she was more than a pretty face. Hall was North's right arm and protector, and woe to anyone who she felt wanted to hurt Ollie.

If North was out of the office, and he frequently was, it was Hall who kept things running, sorting out the stacks of messages, relaying instructions and messages to and from North, and keeping a lid on things. A visitor waiting for Ollie would always be surprised by Hall's ability to handle what seemed like a dozen different tasks at once. She was a blur of activity, pounding the keys of the word processor, answering the constantly ringing phone, responding to inquiries from other NSC staffers, and greeting visitors. Like North, she put in extraordinary hours, and when reports later surfaced that she was a professional model on the side and had dated Arturo Cruz Jr., son of the *contra* leader, many who had known her wondered when she had found the time.

## AFTER THE ISRAELI INVASION OF LEBANON

The first major crisis in which North played a significant role came in 1982, when the Israelis invaded Lebanon. Attached to the entourage of special Middle East presidential envoy Philip Habib, North arrived in Israel on June 6, just as Israeli armor was about to push into Lebanon and lay siege to Beirut, the "international capital of terrorism."

While Ambassador Habib was dining  
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## The Ollie We Knew

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with Israel's prime minister, Menachem Begin, at his official residence in Jerusalem. North was invited by Ariel Sharon, the nation's defense minister and the architect of the invasion of Lebanon, to join him for dinner at his desert ranch. During what North recalls as a cordial meal, Sharon pulled out detailed maps of Lebanon and showed him Israeli troop positions throughout the country. Referring to high-resolution maps of the Bekaa Valley, he described how four Israeli tank divisions, under a unified command structure, were just beginning to enter the Valley, where the Syrians were on the withdrawal.

Then, according to North, "Sharon laid down his secret plan to push an Israeli tank division to the Chouf Mountains and with the two forces, at the Chouf and the armored corps in the Bekaa, to encircle the two Syrian tank divisions that were positioned at the northern section of the Bekaa Valley, around the Beirut-Damascus highway." Once this was achieved, said North, Sharon's secret plan called for the United States to rush to the rescue of the Syrian divisions, in a replay of Kissinger's design to rescue the Egyptian Third Army after it was trapped by the Israelis in the Sinai Desert during the 1973 war. Sharon was convinced, North maintained, that such an act would have brought Syria to the American camp of Arab states and would have put an end to Soviet influence in Syria.

After dinner, North rushed back to the American Embassy in Tel Aviv and, bypassing diplomatic channels, sent a report of Sharon's secret war plan and political proposal to his boss, national-security adviser William Clark, who was with the President at Versailles. He then rejoined Habib, and they made the rounds of other Middle East capitals, arriving in Damascus two days later.

As it turned out, no one at the White House or elsewhere in the government, including Clark, took the time to give serious attention to the Sharon proposal. It was during this period that North began to think that it was all but impossible to overcome bureaucratic indifference or opposition to the Reagan agenda.

Intelligence information arriving on the desk of the commander-in-chief, which was supposed to help the President and the NSC create specific policies, was often inadequate or biased, tailored by the bureaucracy to produce an anticipated outcome. The President and his advisers, North thought, simply ratified the conclusions already reached

they had no way of independently collecting intelligence. North's frustration with the bureaucracy is evident in his private communications reprinted in the Tower Commission report. At one point, he complains that the CIA tried for two days to get a plane that he needed, and in the end failed, whereas it took retired Major General Richard Secord, a key figure in North's network of special operators, only five minutes.

This frustration over an often intractable and self-centered bureaucracy was at

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the heart of the NSC's gradual transformation from a consultative unit into an operational one. And as the NSC became ever more operational, Oliver North's power expanded, for he was the premier special operator on the NSC staff, the seat-of-the-pants tactician willing to try anything that might bring results. That sort of freelancing was found to ruffle feathers in the administration. When North bypassed diplomatic procedure by alerting Washington about Sharon's secret war plans, newly appointed Secretary of State George Shultz confronted North during one of Shultz's first NSC meetings.

"Son," said Shultz, grabbing North by the arm, "don't you ever dare to get involved in diplomatic matters again." Shultz then turned and walked away. It was the last time the Secretary of State spoke to him.

### LEARNING WASHINGTON'S WAYS

From late 1982, North was involved in every major foreign-policy crisis, and began to travel extensively throughout Latin America, the Middle East, and Europe on secret missions, shedding his role as White House adviser for that of White House special operator. Soon he was running actual operations and becoming the White House point man on the scene when there was a crisis somewhere in the world.

North was also becoming a talented bureaucratic insighter, adept at manipulating the system to get what he wanted. Through use of White House stationery

people are unimpressed by the operator's saying that "the White House is calling"—North rapidly developed the reputation of a doer.

North was traveling continuously on White House jets, chartered private jets, CIA aircraft, and commercial flights, meeting with foreign officials and intelligence operatives, conducting secret diplomacy. Sometimes he would put in his regular fourteen-hour day at the office, then slip away to some foreign destination for a meeting during the night, and be back behind his desk the following morning, having caught only a catnap while in the air.

He traveled under a variety of assumed names, including "Mr. Goode," "Mr. Johns," and "Mr. West," using false passports provided by the CIA or diplomatic documents obtained from the Department of State. When involved in highly secretive missions abroad, North would travel in a variety of disguises, sometimes dying his hair or wearing a wig, donning eyeglasses, and dressing in casual attire.

### "YOU OUGHT TO HAVE FAITH"

On October 25, 1983, less than a week after the murder of Grenada's Marxist leader, Maurice Bishop, by another Marxist faction, the United States invaded the tiny Caribbean island, ostensibly to restore order and to protect some 1,100 Americans living there from being taken hostage. US troops encountered resistance from Cuban soldiers and airport workers, and the final American toll was put at 18 dead and 91 wounded.

North coordinated military and policy-planning groups in preparation for the invasion and fought a losing battle to persuade Pentagon brass to use only Marines in the operation instead of a combined force of Marines, the 82nd Airborne, elements of Delta Force, Navy SEALs, and Army Rangers. He also traveled to Caribbean nations to enlist support and approval of the operation, and put together the regional multinational force that never went ashore. During this period, he slept in his office.

It was North who was dispatched by McFarlane to get President Reagan's signature on the presidential order authorizing the deployment of the 22nd MAU (Marine Amphibious Unit) to Grenada so that the invasion could proceed. When "Operation Urgent Fury" was launched on the 25th with a predawn landing by Navy SEALs, North monitored the drama from the White House Situation Room. "I couldn't do anything more," he said later. "At that stage it was up to the invading troops."

A key element of his plan was for planes to leave Miami and fly

to Grenada, where they would evacuate the Americans residing on the island, including many students attending a medical school in St. George's, the capital. Intelligence briefers were scheduled to go along with the planes and brief the evacuees on the return trip.

To his chagrin, North learned that the Air Force planes had not picked up the intelligence briefers and had gone to Grenada without them. He feared that without an understanding of the administration's motivations and its estimate of the danger they were in, the students would accuse the President and the US government of conducting a needless military operation. He feared that criticism by the students would play into the hands of members of Congress and the media waiting for Reagan to stumble.

North decided to report the impending disaster at once to his boss, national-security adviser Bud McFarlane, and to admit personal responsibility for not adequately supervising that stage of the operation. He ran upstairs from the Situation Room and poked his head into the Oval Office in hope of glimpsing McFarlane. Instead he saw the President, who called him into his office.

According to those close to both men, the President's relations with North were informal and warm. Reagan probably saw in the dashing young Marine, with his quick mind and easy humor, something he never saw in his own sons.

When North met with Reagan, he often entered the Oval Office through the side door, and his meetings were not logged in.

North reciprocated the President's trust and affection, and more than once told friends he would stand in front of bullets for Reagan. He idolized the man who, he believed, was responsible for making America "stand tall."

"What's the problem, Ollie?" Reagan asked. "You appear to be disturbed by something."

North told the President what had happened and took responsibility for having failed his commander-in-chief.

"Where are the planes now?" asked the President.

"On their way back from Grenada with the students," North responded.

"Come with me," said the President, leading the way into an adjacent room, where there was a TV cabinet with three screens.

"Sit down and let's watch their arrival." Reagan consoled the younger man in a fatherly way. "Everything will be fine. You ought to have faith."

While the battle for Grenada was still under way, the President and North sat opposite the three TV screens and watched the arrival of the American students. When the first student, Jeff Gel-

ler, deplaned at Charleston Air Force Base in South Carolina, he dropped down and kissed the tarmac.

Reagan turned to North and said. "You see, Ollie, you ought to have more faith in the American people."

## THE SPECIAL OPERATOR

North also developed a very close relationship with CIA Director William Casey, who was engaged in what amounted to a personal crusade to revitalize the

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nation's intelligence capabilities, which had suffered during the traumas of Vietnam, Watergate, the Church Committee, and other inquiries into CIA wrongdoing. Casey, who had learned his trade with the OSS in World War II, had a special taste for covert operations and secret diplomacy and liked to roll up his sleeves and immerse himself in various operations. He often said that the US must roll back the Soviet empire in just one place, and then it would begin to collapse. From Casey's standpoint, Grenada didn't represent a significant roll-back, and he continued to probe for the opportunity to demonstrate that Soviet ascendancy over the West was neither inevitable nor historically ordained.

Casey recognized North's aptitude as an operator, noting the spark in his eyes and the desire to do whatever was called for to ensure that the US did not come up second best. Casey soon began channeling covert operations through North and, by so doing, avoided the requirement to report such operations to congressional oversight panels.

In his official position as deputy director for political-military affairs at the National Security Council, North was responsible for terrorism issues, the handling of American hostages, and the planning and coordination of almost anything that fell under the rubric of low-intensity warfare, including El Salvador, the *contras*, and support of other anti-communist rebels. In this capacity, he was the NSC's representative on the Intergovernmental Committee for Combating Terrorism and, under NSC adviser John Poindexter, often served as

acting director of the Terrorist Incident Working Group.

One of North's strengths was his ability to work with people, although sometimes he was accused of being high-handed. He got so deeply involved in his work that he often clashed with the Pentagon and the State Department. He began to develop a reputation as "the world's most powerful lieutenant colonel." Other times, with more than a little jealousy, he was referred to in some quarters as "Field Marshal North."

He was aware of the barbs but rarely took offense. Most of the time he took the humor in stride, as when he told a friend, "I must be doing something right. They've named a parking lot at the Pentagon after me."

During 1983 and 1984, North spent a lot of time in El Salvador monitoring the situation firsthand, traveling with Ambassador-at-Large Richard Stone and meeting in the field with the Green Beret advisers to the Salvadoran Army. On one occasion, North was flying in a small plane to get a closer look at the action in El Salvador, accompanied by another American, when they heard over the radio that a Salvadoran Army unit was under heavy fire from an enemy position they could not locate. Their desperate calls for a spotter plane and a helicopter to evacuate the wounded were turned down because all available aircraft were engaged elsewhere. North didn't hesitate to aid the unit. They overflew the area, located the enemy position, and directed Salvadoran mortar fire on it. Then they wheeled the plane about and dived toward the ground while North informed the Salvadorans that he was landing on a dirt strip. Enemy gunfire raked the small plane, shattering one of the windows. The wounded were loaded aboard, and they took off in a hail of bullets. Once airborne, they transported the two wounded Salvadoran soldiers to a military hospital in San Salvador. Neither survived.

Later the story made the rounds in Central America of the two gringos who had risked their lives to save two Salvadoran soldiers, and it made North very popular within Salvadoran military circles. When he needed some assistance or a special favor from the Salvadoran military, North had only to ask.

## THE ISRAELI CONNECTION

"Ollie North's biggest contribution to the Western society," observed a top Israeli intelligence official, "was his ability to persuade American decision makers to take active measures against international terrorism." The Reagan administration had come to power with tough talk against terrorism

but few initiatives.

It was not until the traumas of 1983—the bombing of the US Embassy and the US Embassy annex in Beirut, the destruction of the US Marine headquarters at the Beirut airport with the loss of 241 American lives, and the bombing of the US Embassy in Kuwait—that the administration began seriously to address terrorism.

On April 3, 1984, President Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive 138 (NSDD 138), which amounted to a declaration of war against terrorism. In the preamble to the still-classified document, the US stated that "states that use or support terrorism cannot be allowed to do so without consequences," and went on to note that when all other efforts to dissuade states from supporting terrorism fail, "the United States has a right to defend itself." Ollie North was one of the architects of NSDD 138.

"Ollie," said a close friend and colleague at the NSC, "took an oath to hunt and bring to trial the Shiite terrorist who was responsible for the bombing of the Marine headquarters." The quest for those behind the October 23 bombing brought North together with Israeli intelligence. "The Israelis," said North later, "were far ahead of us. They had better intelligence, kept it updated," and were—as a small nation without global responsibilities—able to conduct surgical counter-terrorist operations in a fairly unrestrained fashion.

The Israelis quickly saw North as a power behind the scenes at the National Security Council. Thus, when the Israelis spotted Imad Mughnaya—the mastermind of the bombings of the US Embassy, the Marine headquarters, and the French paratrooper barracks—on the French Riviera, they alerted North. Mughnaya was traveling under an assumed name and using a false passport. North decided to hunt Mughnaya himself, one on one.

Not a lot is known about Mughnaya. Unlike Carlos or Abu Nidal, Mughnaya has attracted little attention in the Western media. Yet he is perhaps the most ruthless and successful terrorist in the world today. In little more than three years, Mughnaya managed to destroy the US Embassy in West Beirut, killing most of the CIA station in that country and forcing American diplomats to retreat to East Beirut. In the aftermath of the bombing of the US Marine barracks, he forced the United States to withdraw its military contingent from Lebanon. His men also drove the Foreign Legion and French "paras" from the country. With a single car bomb, Mughnaya was able to nearly wipe out Israel's counter-terrorist network in southern Lebanon.

He orchestrated the kidnapping of the new CIA chief of station, William Buckley, and many of the other Western hostages. By 1985, Mughnaya was the most wanted terrorist in the world.

Learning of Mughnaya's whereabouts, North went into action. He asked his Israeli contact at the embassy in Washington, Colonel Moshe Zur, as well as Major General Uri Simhoni and the Israeli prime minister's anti-terrorism adviser, Amiram Nir, to maintain surveillance of Mughnaya and not let

identification, and boasted that they had actually saved both services a major embarrassment.

It was North's first major failure, and one that he would not soon forget. The United States would have to rely on its own devices to fight terrorism, at least until the Europeans could be convinced that cooperation was preferable to the use of military force by the US. He began the quest to find an opportunity to strike a decisive blow against terrorists, hoping such an action by the US would bring the Europeans to their senses.

In retrospect, North's frustration and bitterness over having failed to catch the man responsible for the murder of his fellow Marines may have played a role in his later willingness to consider any means to deal with terrorism, and in so doing sowed the seeds of "Irangate." The one thing he was never shy about saying was that what we were doing "isn't working." He often blamed those in key government positions who wanted to remain safe spectators. The way he saw it, too many people at State, Defense, and in the intelligence agencies were more interested in protecting their own behinds than in accomplishing anything. At every meeting there seemed to be a dozen naysayers dedicated to explaining why something was impossible. Unlike those he saw all around him, North did not have his next promotion as the overriding factor determining his actions. He seemed to have an all-consuming desire to accomplish the task at hand, especially if he believed it to be the President's will. North's goals were straightforward enough: to fight terrorism, to give form and substance to the Reagan doctrine, to bring down the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, and ultimately to achieve the release of the American hostages in Lebanon. As he saw it, these were Reagan's goals and he was Reagan's instrument. With luck, courage, and imagination they could give the nation victories it would be proud of.

But North also knew there would be a price. Beginning in 1984, he remarked to friends that he had flown too close to the fire and that the day "will come when I have to resign in disgrace from the administration" and "take the heat for the President." But he never expressed doubts about what he was doing, and appeared resigned to the fact that his Marine career would be at an end when he left the White House.

## NORTH'S LIFE AT HOME

The North household was a traditional one. Ollie was the breadwinner, and his wife, Betsy, was a homemaker and full-time mother to their four children: Tait, Stuart, Sarah, and Dornin. With the

*When the Israelis spotted Imad Mughnaya—the most wanted terrorist in the world—on the French Riviera, they alerted North, who decided to hunt Mughnaya himself, one on one.*

him slip away. He told the CIA and his superiors at the NSC of the development, and a task force of CIA operators and representatives of military special-operations forces was established to monitor the situation. One ingredient was still missing: cooperation from the French.

Although impressed with the Soviet method of handling terrorists, North knew there was little support in the administration for assassinating them. It was more consistent with US values to shell the Chouf Mountains with a battleship, killing and injuring many innocent people, than to target an individual terrorist, known to have been involved in the murder of American citizens, and shoot him between the eyes. Thus North had only one choice: to capture Mughnaya on French soil and bring about his extradition back to the US to stand trial.

At first all went well. The French promised cooperation and assumed prime surveillance of Mughnaya. But problems began to arise. The US could not get French assurances that Mughnaya would be extradited; it appeared that they wanted to try him themselves.

While North, in a series of transatlantic shuttle missions, tried to iron out differences between the two allies, the situation began to unravel. In view of growing French recalcitrance, the US and Israel had maintained their surveillance of Mughnaya and were alarmed when he was plucked from under their noses by French police. The French bundled Mughnaya off to the airport and put him on the first flight to the Middle East, later claiming that American and Israeli operatives had been mistaken in their

profits from the sale of previous homes. North bought a large, rambling old house in Great Falls, across the Potomac from the White House. The house cost a small fortune to heat, and the North family found they could not afford to keep the central heating system on all the time. North chopped a big stack of wood, and they kept a fire going around the clock in the main fireplace for heat. "The house is just too big to get really warm," said North. "So on very cold nights, everybody moved to the living room and slept there."

When North returned home from one of his trips to the Middle East, where he had been working to free the American hostages in Lebanon, he found that his entire family was ill. It was the winter of 1985, at the end of a protracted cold spell. When the family had moved to the living room, Betsy and the four kids had all contracted pneumonia. Trying to cope with a sick family and the demands of his job taxed North's energy. Although he managed to leave the office a little earlier each day, before long he was back to the same grinding pace. At one point, after a crisis, he promised Betsy that he would come home at least once a week.

Even when he managed to make it home, the phone would ring at all hours. There was no hiding from the White House signal switchboard, and North was forever responding to calls from *contra* leaders, government officials, and assorted operatives. But despite his absences, he and Betsy managed to maintain a semblance of family life. Deeply religious, North and his family attended church on Sunday whenever they could.

Though not without ups and downs, Ollie and Betsy's relationship remained strong. For her, he was always Larry; if he had slipped from her good graces, he was Lawrence. She never adjusted to calling him Ollie, as his friends did.

Betsy was working at a Montgomery Ward store when she met him through a cousin when he was a young midshipman. To hear her tell it, she was not impressed with him. "He had to persuade me, to make a big effort, before we started dating on a regular basis," she recalled.

The Norths were not part of the Washington party circuit, and they socialized primarily with friends in one another's homes. When he had free time, North would almost always spend it with his family. The family owned a horse, and he took a keen interest in the kids' riding lessons. For North, the family was his private world, and he rarely admitted outsiders.

As his name began to pop up in the media, he worried about his family's

safety. On one occasion, fearful that they might be a target, he moved them to a military base in the Washington area for a short time.

After North was fired from his White House job, there was no way he could shield his family from the media. He despaired when some of the particularly vicious stories, accusing him of all sorts of transgressions, began to affect his children. When his oldest daughter, bitter over the way her father had been treated, began to criticize the United

*At one point, after a crisis, North promised his wife he would come home at least once a week. But even when he managed to make it home, the phone would ring at all hours.*

States, North was deeply hurt. Responding to her anger, he tried to give her some sense of perspective. "If this were any other country in this world and your father fell from grace," he told her, "he would leave for work one day and never return."

He later confided to a friend, "Maybe it was not worth it after all."

### **TWA 847 AND THE ACHILLE LAURO: THE START OF A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP**

On June 14, 1985, a TWA airliner, Flight 847, was seized by Shiite gunmen over Greece, beginning a seventeen-day hostage ordeal that saw the aircraft forced to fly to Algiers twice and Beirut three times. On the second day of the crisis, a young American Navy diver, Robert Stethem, was murdered by the terrorists. Some passengers were released in Algiers and Beirut, but on June 16, after the plane touched down in Beirut for the third time, the remaining 39 American passengers and crew were broken up into groups and dispersed throughout the city so as to make any rescue attempt more difficult.

In the end, with the threat of US military intervention looming over the region, negotiations secured the release of the remaining 39 hostages. As part of the agreement, Israel released—in an ostensibly unconnected move—more than 700 Shiite prisoners. According to North, the agreement had broken down late on June 29 when Hezbollah terrorists, holding the four Jewish passengers, refused to go along with the deal.

The Reagan administration had taken the position that it wanted *all* the hostages back or there would be no deal. North, already deeply involved in secret diplomacy with a faction of the Iranian government headed by Speaker of the Iranian Parliament Hojatolislam Hashemi Rafsanjani, said that the White House had made an urgent plea to Rafsanjani and that he had intervened to secure the release of the remaining hostages, permitting them to be transported to Damascus in a Red Cross convoy.

In addition to playing a key role in overall crisis management from the White House, North became immersed in the unfolding events in both the Middle East and El Salvador. One colleague remembers him taking time to secure the order lowering the flags to half-mast in honor of the slain Stethem. North personally made the arrangements for the return of the bodies of the four murdered American Marines to the United States. He felt that the dead American servicemen deserved no less, and he distrusted government bureaucrats to get such action taken quickly. North had little time for excuses and bulldozed his way through red tape, regardless of the noses he bent out of joint.

During the TWA hijacking crisis, the United States and Israel had reached a new level of cooperation. For the first time since the establishment of the "special relationship," that cooperation reached into areas of strategic cooperation, military options, and joint covert operations. A secret channel of communication was established between the two nations, and Oliver North was the US point man. The decision to name North as the American liaison was ratified by top Pentagon and intelligence officials, and known to only a very small group at the National Security Council.

It was also during the TWA hijacking that the role of the Iranians as leading sponsors of Middle East terrorism became firmly established to everyone's satisfaction. This, ultimately, would lead to the decision to open a secret dialogue with Iranian "moderates" and to sell arms to Tehran. Although no one recognized it at the time, the US was becoming sucked into a pattern of doing business "the Israeli way," in which the counter-terrorists were in the driver's seat and running roughshod over traditional foreign-policy and defense considerations.

Appearing before a closed-door session of the Senate Intelligence Committee on June 19, 1985, CIA Director William Casey said, "The United States is at war" with international terrorism and "the TWA hijacking is just the beginning." Casey's words proved to be prophetic. While North had little room

to operate during the TWA 847 crisis, perhaps his finest hour would come three months later in the wake of the seajacking of the Italian cruise liner *Achille Lauro*.

At 8:45 AM on October 7, 1985, Palestinian seajackers burst into the ship's dining room with weapons firing, slightly injuring two passengers. Once in control, they demanded the release of 50 Palestinians being held in Israel. When negotiations began to falter the following day, the terrorists murdered wheelchair-bound Leon Klinghoffer of New York and dumped his body over the side of the ship. They had shuffled the passports of the Americans, and Klinghoffer's had come up on top.

From the moment that news of the seizure reached Washington, the Reagan administration, its patience already worn thin by the TWA 847 incident, began planning a military rescue of the ship in case the situation began to deteriorate. The Navy SEALs, commando frogmen capable of operating in water, in the air, and on land—were chosen for the mission.

The operation was scheduled for the night of Wednesday, October 9, and it was at this point that detailed intelligence became critical. North, coordinating the operation as head of a special White House counter-terrorist task force, was stunned to learn that US intelligence had lost track of the ship on Tuesday, despite all its sophisticated satellite and communications monitoring equipment.

Actually, ship detection in mid-ocean is not that easy. A ship can be located through the signals emitted by its own navigational radar, by its radio communications, or by means of aerial reconnaissance and photos. US intelligence was configured to track the Soviet Navy, not commercial vessels. But the Israelis had suffered a number of terrorist penetrations involving "mother" ships off the coast and had sophisticated monitoring devices capable of locating and tracking threatening vessels.

In desperation, North turned to his Israeli friends for help, using the channel established during the TWA 847 crisis. He called Major General Simhoni at the Israeli Embassy in Washington and explained the situation. Minutes later, Simhoni was back on the line with the vital information requested by North. The Israelis, fearing that the terrorists on board might try to carry out their original plan of attacking the Israeli port of Ashdod, had kept the ship under surveillance.

At this moment, the ship was sailing close to the Syrian coast, with the goal of entering the Syrian military and oil terminus of Tunis. North passed the Israeli information along to the National Secu-



A woman of striking appearance, who was also a part-time model, Faun Hall was considered Ollie North's right arm and a very efficient, hard-working secretary.

rity Agency (NSA), which had managed to locate the ship. But on Wednesday, the day of the planned operation, NSA once again could not locate the hostage cruise liner, and an embarrassed North again had to turn to the Israelis for help. As before, Simhoni was quickly able to supply North with the ship's exact coordinates. From that point, "we kept a secure line open between military intelligence headquarters [in Israel] and my office at the embassy," General Simhoni later confirmed. Preparation for the nighttime assault went forward, but the operation was never launched.

After the Syrians refused to let the ship dock at Tartus, the *Achille Lauro* sailed back to Port Said, where Mohammed Abul Abbas, the leader of the Palestine Liberation Front, a PLO splinter group, convinced the pirates to surrender to Egyptian authorities.

It seemed there was little left for the American commandos to do at Akrotiri, so they were ordered home. Meanwhile, diplomatic efforts were under way to convince the Egyptians to turn the terrorists over to Italy or the United States. The following morning, Washington time, an NSC staff meeting was interrupted with a message from Egyptian President Mubarak informing national-security adviser Bud McFarlane that the terrorists had already left Egypt. Presi-

dent Hosni Mubarak had given the same information to US Ambassador Nicholas Velotes and repeated it publicly.

McFarlane turned to North and asked him where the US commandos were.

"On their way home," answered North, knowing that some members of SEAL Team Six were already in Gibraltar, en route back to the United States.

Not trusting the Egyptians, McFarlane asked North to "check where the terrorists are."

"Will do," said North, who began polling US intelligence sources. Failing to get definitive information, he called General Simhoni again.

"Uri," North inquired, "where are the four thugs?"

"Give me 30 minutes and I'll get back to you," Simhoni answered.

At 8:45 AM, General Simhoni reported: "The four are still in Egypt."

"Are you sure?" North demanded.

"Absolutely," came the reply. It turned out that a special Israeli monitoring unit was keeping tabs on preparations to ship the terrorists out of Egypt. A short time later, the NSA was able to verify the Israeli intelligence but unable to identify the plane on which the terrorists were scheduled to be flown to Tunis. Simhoni's sources were quickly able to pin down the location of the EgyptAir jet.

North rushed upstairs from the White House Situation Room to McFarlane's office. There he found McFarlane, preparing to board the Marine One helicopter to accompany the President on a campaign swing to Chicago; McFarlane's deputy, Vice Admiral John Poindexter; NSC spokesperson Karna Small; Near East and South Asian specialist Jock Covey; and McFarlane's secretary.

North launched into a report. "The friends," he began, using the common euphemism of the US intelligence community—until the arrest of Israeli spy Jonathan J. Pollard—when referring to the Israelis. "have the four in Egypt. We have confirmation." Then he spoke for everyone in the room: "We have to do something about it."

"What can be done?" Poindexter asked.

"Do you remember Yamamoto?" answered North, referring to the Japanese admiral whose aircraft was intercepted and shot down by American P-38 fighters during World War II. It was Yamamoto who had led the attack on Pearl Harbor.

"You don't want to shoot it down?" Poindexter asked.

"No," answered North. "Just force it to land at Sigonella, Sicily."

McFarlane told North to "get moving." Then he rushed out to the White House helicopter landing pad.

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North went to work at once. A short time later, North presented the outline of his plan to Poindexter, who approved it, and contacted McFarlane, via a secure communications link, in Chicago.

Once Reagan's approval had been secured, the Sixth Fleet was given new orders and the aircraft carrier *Saratoga* directed to sail in the vicinity of Crete at full speed. Timely and precise intelligence still remained a hurdle. By this time, US intelligence was able to keep the NSC advised as to the whereabouts of the terrorists, but the tail number and the departure time of the EgyptAir flight still remained a mystery.

North again called General Simhoni, who had an open line to Major General Ehud Barak, chief of Israel's military intelligence branch known as AMAN. Simhoni passed along North's request to AMAN and established an open line to the White House Situation Room, from which North was monitoring the operations of the Sixth Fleet.

"The Israelis had it all," said North later. They provided the US with the plane's identification numbers and call sign seconds after it was in the air. North, from his desk in the White House basement, transmitted the crucial information to the *Saratoga*. While the *Saratoga* was launching its F-14 fighters to carry out the interception and take-down, North watched the US commandos, now over the Atlantic, turn around and make for the NATO air base at Sigonella.

For the *Saratoga*'s fighters, it was a little like trying to find a needle in a haystack. They had to single out the EgyptAir jet from among 67 other airliners flying in the international air corridor that skirts the southern littoral of North Africa.

McFarlane had communicated some doubts about the operation to North, who shared them with Simhoni. Accordingly, Simhoni began planning a backup operation that would have brought the Egyptian jet down at an Israeli military base.

"Will you be able to move in time?" North double-checked.

"We will give you all the assistance we are able to provide," responded Simhoni.

Then North asked the question that was already beginning to trouble administration planners about Sigonella: "Will you hand them [the terrorists] over to us or bring them to justice yourselves?"

"Whichever suits you better," came the response.

The Israelis were soon on the line again with even more stunning intelligence. Mohammed Abul Abbas, the leader of the PLF, was on board the

EgyptAir jet, not to mention a number of armed Egyptian commandos. North knew that Abbas was the likely mastermind of the seajacking. The chance to bring a top terrorist leader to justice for his crimes was too good to be true.

The key now was to buy more time for the *Saratoga*'s Tomcats so they would have time enough to make a positive identification of the jetliner and force it to Sigonella. North asked the Israelis if they could isolate the jetliner by jamming all its communications, except

*The Israelis were soon on the line again with even more stunning intelligence.*

*Mohammed Abul Abbas, the leader of the PLF, was on board the EgyptAir jet, not to mention a number of armed Egyptian commandos.*

those they wanted to get through, and at the same time so intimidate the air-traffic controller at Tunis that permission for the EgyptAir flight to land would be denied.

When the pilot of the EgyptAir jetliner bearing Mohammed Abul Abbas and his gunmen sought permission to land from what he thought was the Tunis air controller, his request was denied. Unknown to the pilot, he was really communicating with an Arabic-speaking Israeli military officer in a flying intelligence center.

Shortly thereafter, the Tomcats, flying with darkened cockpits and without lights, intercepted the jetliner near the island of Crete. The pilot of the jetliner urgently tried to contact Cairo for new orders but was prevented by a US EA-6B, which was jamming his radio communications. In case the pilot decided to try to make a run for Athens, Beirut, or some other "friendly" city, the US sent a strong warning to those governments not to let the aircraft land.

Finally, the desperate EgyptAir pilot capitulated and agreed to follow the warplanes that surrounded his aircraft. Meanwhile, the Italians were cutting a new deal with the Egyptians. According to North, "The Italians promised the Egyptians that Abu Abbas [Mohammed Abul Abbas] would be saved, as he was the only link between the terrorist attack and the PLO chairman [Yasir Arafat]. The Italians would keep the four seajackers, they promised, but would permit Abbas to escape. "Once the second deal was

in the making," North recalled afterward. "the Italians ordered their *carabinieri* to Sigonella Air Base to prevent us from taking Abu Abbas to the US."

The EgyptAir jetliner had just landed when the transporters carrying Army General Carl W. Stiner and the other members of his command touched down on the runway. As the Egyptian plane came to a stop and stairs were rolled toward the door by ground personnel, black-clad US commandos surrounded the jetliner. General Stiner handed his Uzi submachine gun and pistol to one of his men and climbed the steps to the plane. The plane's door opened and the American general faced two Egyptian commandos, who pointed their Soviet-made AK-47s at him.

After some discussion—during which an open line to Oliver North and the White House Situation Room was maintained—the Egyptian commandos laid down their weapons and Mohammed Abbas and the four seajackers were escorted off the aircraft toward a waiting American plane with its engines running. Suddenly, Italian *carabinieri* rushed to the parked US plane and, with weapons leveled, formed a circle around the American commandos and their captives. Steiner was on the radio, describing the drama to North. It was at this moment, North later recalled, that he "knew it was all over. We were not going to clash with one of our allies over a terrorist."

The US commandos ultimately permitted the Italians to spirit Abbas and his companions away. Abbas was then allowed by the Italian government to slip quietly out of Italy on a chartered Yugoslavian plane, ignoring a US request for his detention and extradition. His four companions were detained by the Italian government and ultimately forced to stand trial.

For the Reagan administration, the midair interception of the *Achille Lauro* pirates was a triumph. "We Bag the Bums," trumpeted the *New York Daily News*. Oliver North later had the front page framed and mounted on his wall. The President's approval rating soared to 68 percent. But for North, it was, at best, a mixed success. He believed that the Craxi government's capitulation to the terrorists demonstrated once again that America's European allies could not be counted on in the war against terrorism, and that the United States would be forced to take even more drastic steps to protect its citizens.

"It was a piece of art," North reflected sadly, describing the operation. "It was a masterpiece of intelligence work, and there was smooth cooperation with some allies while others chose not to cooperate, fearing terrorist retaliation.

The interception was a model of US government agencies working together." He faulted the Italians for their lack of courage, and while the rest of the nation was savoring the triumph, he returned to the drawing board to plan the next US blow against terrorism.

Around Washington, the young Marine officer suddenly became a celebrity of sorts when his role in the daring operation was reported. At the White House his star was clearly on the rise; as a result of the triumph, he was virtually

*Around Washington, the young Marine officer suddenly became a celebrity of sorts when his role in the daring operation was reported. At the White House, his star was clearly on the rise.*

given a free hand to carry the war to the terrorists and their state sponsors with as much creativity and energy as he could muster.

"No lieutenant colonel ever had been given as much power—to rewrite US counter-terror policy—and to have such a huge impact on our foreign policy," reflected one senior State Department official close to North. He viewed it as "a colossal mistake."

### "THE SHORES OF TRIPOLI"

Despite North's expanded portfolio and the daring seizure of the *Achille Lauro* pirates, terrorism was soon on the rise again. Terrorist organizations such as Abu Nidal's Black June, Yasir Arafat's Force 17, and the militant Shiite sect known as Hizballah were involved in new attacks, and nations such as Libya, Syria, and Iran showed little sign of reducing their support of terrorist proxies.

North believed that the only real answer was to strike at the "heart of the beast"—the terrorist-sponsoring states themselves—and make it clear that they would have to pay a significant price for supporting terrorists. Thus, he began to draft detailed contingency plans for striking directly at Libya, the most vulnerable of the state sponsors of terrorism. Unlike Syria, Libya was militarily weak and possessed only a limited air-defense system; and unlike Iran, which presented logistics problems, Libya was vulnerable to US military power, in the form of the Sixth Fleet and various NATO bases scattered across Europe.

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target, its leader, Colonel Moammar Gadhafi, was often called a "loony tune," and he had little international support, even in the Islamic bloc. His repeated threats to join the Warsaw Pact had been brushed aside by the Soviets. The late Egyptian president Anwar Sadat had once described Gadhafi as "100 percent sick and possessed of the demon," and former president of the Sudan Gaafar Nimeiri was even more direct. According to Nimeiri, Gadhafi had a "split personality—both evil."

On March 27 and March 29, 1986, Libyan classified messages were intercepted and decoded by Western intelligence. The messages, which had originated at the Libyan intelligence headquarters in Tripoli, ordered Libyan intelligence attachés posted in the "People's Bureaus" around the world, in a clear and unambiguous manner, to initiate terrorist attacks on American and other Western targets.

"Gadhafi's orders were such," North said, "that we had to move very quickly in order to prevent a major disaster." The intercepted message ordered the following: "Cause maximum casualties to US citizens and other Western people." The message had originated in Tripoli under Gadhafi's personal authority and outlined operational plans for more than ten terrorist attacks.

There was growing concern at the NSC that the Libyan terrorist attacks were imminent, but the problem for the North team was to identify specific targets before they were hit. By Friday, April 6, the NSC team was able to piece together enough of the puzzle to figure out that one target chosen by the Libyan operatives was a West Berlin bar, disco, or nightclub frequented by US servicemen. MPs were dispatched throughout West Berlin to pull American servicemen out of all night spots. Five minutes before MPs would have arrived at the La Belle disco, a powerful bomb ripped through it.

At this exact moment, Gadhafi—perhaps fearing that he had gone too far—initiated secret contacts with the Reagan administration, using a series of semi-official channels and private individuals, including Italian businessmen and oil-industry sources. The administration, however, had lost all interest in Gadhafi's unorthodox overtures to Washington. "All the messengers and well-wishers were told to lay off," North said. "They were told to tell Gadhafi that he could approach us through Belgian diplomatic channels," the only approved point of contact.

The administration rejected Gadhafi's overtures not only because of the pending Libyan-sponsored terrorist attacks, but also because US intelligence had un-

covered a Libyan plot to "buy" American hostages from a Shiite terrorist group. "We have solid intelligence that Gadhafi was trying to buy the six American hostages held in Lebanon from Hizballah terrorists that were holding them captive," North contended.

North said that Gadhafi had offered the Hizballah \$100 million for the six Americans and another \$50 million for the French hostages they were holding.

*The NSC team was able to piece together enough of the puzzle to figure out that one target chosen by the Libyan operatives was a West Berlin bar, disco, or nightclub frequented by US servicemen.*

Most of the hostages were imprisoned in a four-story building near one of the runways at Beirut International Airport, in cells two floors below the ground. The building also housed Hizballah families on the upper levels. To block Gadhafi's offer of cash in exchange for the hostages, North said in April 1986: "The US has moved to free the hostages." He refused to elaborate on the details of the US countermove at that time, but it is evident today that secret contacts with Iran were under way and that North hoped they would deliver the American hostages from Libya's grasp.

It was evident to North and other administration planners that the La Belle disco bombing had been the opening salvo of the new terrorist offensive ordered by Gadhafi in late March. North explained, "We were running out of time and working against the ticking terror clock." North knew that protective measures were not enough and that the time was rapidly approaching when the US would have to launch pre-emptive military strikes against terrorists and their state sponsors.

On Wednesday, April 9, during an NSC meeting in the Oval Office, the President was provided with additional information on the Libyan terrorist campaign. The President concluded, "The evidence is irrefutable. It is conclusive. We have to move to stop them from carrying out those terror operations."

North wanted to employ surgical means to hit Gadhafi. The Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon wanted to repeat the strategy employed in the March skirmishes for the Gulf of Sidra, which saw US warplanes attack Libyan patrol boats and land-based radars, and the 1981 sor-

ties in which US F-14s shot down two Libyan fighter-bombers over the disputed waters. North failed to win agreement on using a SEAL team to infiltrate Libya to plant homing devices capable of guiding "Smart" bombs. Had one of the laser projectors been secretly positioned on the grounds of the Azziziya barracks, where Gadhafi lived, he might not have survived the attack and civilian casualties might have been reduced.

The April 9 NSC meeting concluded without the issuance of an executive order for the Libyan air raid. After the NSC meeting, two NSC staff teams met and prepared a target list. Five targets were selected and quickly approved. First on the list was the Azziziya barracks compound, which housed command and communications centers for Libyan military and intelligence operations. It also contained Gadhafi's personal quarters, where his family lived, and the Bedouin tent where Gadhafi often slept.

With up-to-date intelligence from the Israelis, several members of the NSC staff felt that there was a strong probability that "we will get Gadhafi himself." While there was concern that Gadhafi's death not appear as an assassination, but rather fate—being in the wrong place at the wrong time—the replacement of the Gadhafi regime was clearly the Reagan administration's unspoken goal in the raid. Whether Gadhafi was killed in the actual raid or whether he was toppled by a coup triggered by the attack made no difference. What was important was that the Libyan government be dissuaded from using terrorism as an instrument of national policy, and if the best way to achieve that result was the removal of the existing regime in Tripoli, so be it.

On Thursday, April 10, North and Navy and Air Force planners completed the final political and military review in advance of the raid, recommending that the attack be carried out at 2 AM, Tripoli time. This decision, North later confirmed, was predicated on new intelligence information from the Israelis on the readiness of Libyan air defenses. It had been learned that the last Libyan duty officer left his post at midnight, whereupon the entire Libyan air-defense system was shut down. The only remaining threat came from Syrian MiG-21 pilots that manned the Libyan first interceptor squadron on a 24-hour-a-day basis. The Syrian interceptors, however, were not operationally independent and therefore could not engage an enemy attack without clearance. Each of their sorties had to be cleared in advance with the Libyan supreme command or with Gadhafi personally. Based on that information, said North, "we were rather sure that at 2 AM it would take the Syrians hours before they could obtain clear-

ance for an interception sortie."

Although the actual date of the attack had not yet been set and was awaiting final presidential action, by April 10 "everything was in place and all systems were ready to go," observed a Joint Chiefs of Staff source. When the National Security Council met the following day to select a date for the raid, based on recommendations from Bill Casey and North, it was decided to postpone the

*The decision was taken to postpone the operation mainly because of Casey's insistence that more time be given to pull his agents—"who risked their lives for us"—out of Libya.*

operation. The decision was taken mainly because of Casey's insistence that more time be given to pull his agents—"who risked their lives for us"—out of Libya or permit them to reach more secure locations. Despite the delay, not all the CIA's agents were able to get out of Libya before the raid, although there is no evidence that any of them were later killed or captured.

North wanted to postpone the operation for a few days to obtain more exact intelligence from NSA and the Israeli spy plane on targets. North also was concerned that "too many operational details were being kicked around and too many administration officials and press people were involved in irresponsible speculation" about the possibility of US military action against Libya. "Those who leaked and talked publicly about sensitive intelligence and speculated about the military operation," North argued, "jeopardized the lives of US servicemen and US citizens overseas."

On April 12, Casey informed those gathered for a Saturday meeting at the White House, who by this time were working around the clock, that all his people were safe. Meanwhile, the media had begun to downplay the chances of a military strike against Libya, thus making surprise more likely. The extra time had also resulted in the collection of far more precise data on targets and the location of Gadhafi and other senior Libyan officials. Thus, "at that Saturday meeting," North later observed, "we recommended that the air strike be carried out on Monday night, April 14, or on Tuesday morning, April 15, according to Libyan local time."

When the President returned from

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Camp David on Sunday afternoon, April 13, the NSC was convened. The President was briefed by the national-security adviser on preparations. Then he presented Reagan with options and a draft of the final operational plans. No objections came from any of the NSC members. Admiral Crowe did a short briefing on the final military plan of action. The President asked if his request for a mechanism to recall the planes short of their targets had been implemented. Assured that the command post maintained the ability to abort the operation up to ten minutes before the attack, or at 6:50 PM Eastern Standard Time, the President appeared to be satisfied.

As the final details were being discussed, Reagan instructed aides to prepare a meeting the following afternoon with congressional leaders. Around 4 PM, the President gave final approval to the operation, but not before making angry comments concerning leaks, which he regarded as endangering the safety of the entire mission. The executive order drafted for the operation called for an air strike against "terror targets inside Libya" on Monday night, April 14, 1986.

The President met with congressional leaders on Monday afternoon. The F-111s were already in the air, and he told the assembled members of Congress that if anyone demurred, he would recall the planes at once. No one voiced any objections. The air strike went forward.

Before they left, members of Congress were warned by the President to be extremely careful with their statements to the press. "Whatever you say to the press outside," one participant recalls the President as saying, "will affect the lives of the US pilots."

Despite the President's admonition, House Majority Leader Jim Wright and Senate Minority Leader Robert Byrd told reporters after the meeting that the President was expected to address the nation that evening at 9 PM. To anyone reading between the lines, it was clear that something big was afoot, and because Libya was the issue dominating the headlines, an unexpected presidential address to the nation could mean only one thing. But despite the flurry of media speculation, the Libyans apparently did not get wind of the attack.

At 6:53 PM, EST, the first F-111 crossed the Libyan coastline. The F-111s were flying into the Libyan desert in order to wheel around and attack their targets from the south. At 7 PM, the Sixth Fleet launched its fighter-bombers. Five minutes later, Cable News Network broadcast the first news of the attack from Tripoli, and White House spokesman Larry Speakes was directed to meet with the White House press corps. He changed his tie and rushed to

the press room. At 30 seconds after 7:30 PM, the attack was broken off and all planes were reported to be leaving the area.

The mood in the White House Situation Room was one of jubilation. National-security adviser John Poindexter was moving around the room shaking hands with his staff. Upstairs in the Oval Office, President Reagan was preparing his address to the nation. North was continuing to monitor the returning warplanes, and reports that one of the planes might have gone down were beginning to reach

*North received a copy of the President's remarks only minutes before Reagan was supposed to go on the air. Suddenly North leaped from his chair and bolted from his office, running for the Oval Office.*

him. Soon it was confirmed that one of the eighteen F-111s was unaccounted for.

North received a copy of the President's remarks only minutes before Reagan was supposed to go on the air, and he gave them a furious once-over. Suddenly, he leaped from his chair and bolted from his office, running for the Oval Office.

Seconds before 9 PM, North burst into the Oval Office and made a direct line for the Teleprompter. The President looked up from his papers and stared at North, who was erasing a line from the speech on the Teleprompter.

"What are you doing, Ollie?"

As North finished erasing the line, which said "and they have all returned safely to their bases," he turned to the President: "Sir, we have lost a plane over the Libyan coast."

Reagan continued staring at North in silence for several seconds as if the news had hit him hard.

In retrospect, the mission was to some extent a failure, as neither Gadhafi nor his regime was eliminated.

But as a political counter-terrorist operation, the raid was highly successful. The United States had turned the tables on Libya's erratic strongman: The hunter had become the hunted.

The raid was also aimed at Washington's European allies as a demonstration that the US was prepared to go it alone, if necessary, to protect its citizens and national interests.

## OPERATION "EL DORADO CANYON"

Despite the fluidity of the situation in Libya after the US bombing raid, Gadhafi was able to exact a minor degree of revenge on the US and Great Britain. One day after the raid, two British and one American hostage were executed in West Beirut. According to North, "The Libyan military attaché in Damascus, Major Halifa, was personally responsible for the kidnapping and handling of the three hostages murdered in West Beirut on April 16." North said that it was Halifa who actually killed the three men.

The three hostages were being held by a Hezbollah splinter group controlled and financed by Gadhafi. A note found with the bodies indicated that they had been killed in retaliation for the US raid. Initially it was believed that all three men were British citizens: Leigh Douglas, a lecturer at the American University in Beirut; Philip Padfield, director of a private language school in West Beirut; and freelance journalist Alec Collett. Later, it was learned that the body believed to be Collett's was in reality the remains of American Peter Kilburn, a 60-year-old librarian at the American University.

The murder of Peter Kilburn was particularly painful for North, because he had come very close to securing the release of the quiet American librarian. North and other US officials had hoped to win Kilburn's freedom with a multi-million-dollar ransom payment made with chemically treated bills that would disintegrate within 72 hours, thereby denying the kidnappers any reward for their efforts.

The killings in Beirut were not the only act of revenge. In the weeks that followed, one American diplomat was shot in Aden, South Yemen, and another in Khartoum, the capital of the Sudan. In the two months following the raid, the United States experienced eleven terrorist attacks that could be linked to the action against Libya.

## TRYING TO SAVE THE HOSTAGES

The failure to rescue Peter Kilburn was one of many setbacks in the effort to free American hostages in Lebanon. No problem consumed more of North's time during his last two years on the NSC staff, with the possible exception of trying to keep the *contras* resupplied. North regarded the hostages, at least initially, as a group of addle-brained do-gooders who had failed to exercise good judgment, or who wrongly believed that their "love for the Arabs" would render them secure in a city that was coming



David Jacobson (left) was running the American hospital in Beirut when taken hostage; he was freed in October 1986. He met North in Cyprus, and then again at dinner at the Chevy Chase home of David Halevy (right), then a *Time* correspondent, and his wife, Mikki (next to North).

apart at the seams.

William Buckley was not in this category. He was the CIA chief of station in Beirut, and his kidnapping had elicited much concern within the government. The CIA was said to possess a tape of Buckley's torture that brought tears to the eyes of all who heard it. North and the CIA went to extraordinary lengths to get Buckley back.

Of the other hostages, North felt that only Terry Anderson, a reporter for the Associated Press, had had any business being in Beirut after the situation began to deteriorate in late 1983. North felt that the hostages had put their nation in an awkward position because of their egocentrism and arrogance, and he railed at the media for its willingness to portray US foreign policy in the region as itself hostage to the hostage issue.

What changed North's position was the President's deep concern over the plight of the hostages. The hostages' families put pressure on the administration through the media to do something, and Reagan was touched by their pleas. Later, North would remark bitterly of attacks on the President and the administration by some relatives of the hostages, saying, "Not a day goes by that the President does not ask about the hostages." Reagan directed North to do everything in his power to secure the release of the captive Americans.

North dutifully threw himself into the task. He met frequently with family members and tried to assure them that everything possible was being done. Carol Weir, wife of hostage Reverend Benjamin Weir, later observed that North was the "most humane" person she dealt with in the administration.

North explored many channels in his quest to free the hostages, and virtually all were dead ends. Finally, he turned to Iran, because the Shiite factions holding Western hostages in Lebanon took direct orders from, or at least were influenced by, Tehran. Secret diplomacy with Iran was already under way, involving direct links to the Iranian faction headed by Speaker of the Iranian Parliament Hojatolislam Hashemi Rafsanjani. It was by this means that North and his colleagues were able to secure the release of four hostages: Jeremy Levin, Reverend Benjamin Weir, Father Lawrence Jenco, and David Jacobson. There is evidence that they were on the verge of freeing Thomas Sutherland and Terry Anderson when first reports of the secret US-Iran dialogue surfaced.

### OUT FROM THE SHADOWS

As North began playing an increasingly important role on the NSC staff, he became the darling of the right, who saw in him the embodiment of all the so-called Reagan virtues. He was tough, virile, religious, and a "real Reaganite" in a foreign-policy establishment viewed with distrust and suspicion by conservatives. Former White House political adviser and conservative activist Morton Blackwell described North as "our man." His White House briefings on Central America were praised by almost all who heard them, and he began speaking to select groups of administration supporters in other cities.

North's rising profile elicited attention in the media. It also brought him to the attention of the Soviets, who, on August 22, 1985, in *Isvestia*, published

the first profile of him in any publication. Written by *Isvestia* correspondent A. Palladin, it called North "the face behind the make-up: the favorite of the American extremists." The *Isvestia* story described his origins and background in some detail, reporting that he was "the 'brains' behind the formulation of the plans for the invasion of Grenada." It said that "he compiled a treatise on combatting 'international terrorism' [Washington's name for national liberation movements] in which he persistently argued that 'neutralization,' in other words murder, should not be shunned." It also accused him of acting as an intermediary between the *contras* and "the White House, the CIA, the Pentagon, the State Department, and extremist organizations thirsting to battle with the Reds."

Once he was profiled in Moscow's state-run press, North not only felt that his position as a covert operator was compromised but recognized that the Soviets had targeted him in a way that increased the risks to his own safety and that of his family. Only weeks later, his name appeared on a "hit list" released by Palestinian terrorist Abu Nidal. North and those in the US intelligence community were convinced that the *Isvestia* profile and the Abu Nidal hit list were the work of the Soviet KGB.

But if international terrorists and the Soviets were gunning for Oliver North, so were a number of liberal members of Congress who viewed him as the power at the White House that kept the *contras* fighting against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. North had been part of the planning group that ran the mining operation of Nicaraguan harbors, and he evolved into the chief cheerleader and quartermaster of the ramshackle army based in southern Honduras. He supervised "Project Democracy," which found funds and weapons for the *contras* during the congressional ban on aid, arranged meetings with President Reagan and other senior administration officials, mediated their internal disputes, and assisted them in their dealings with Central American governments.

According to his critics, North was the Svengali of the *contra* movement; to his admirers, he was more their Lawrence of Arabia, as passionately dedicated to their cause as he was opposed to the Sandinista regime they were fighting.

In the end, the *contras* would be part of Oliver North's undoing. Ironically, North's congressional foes such as former representative Mike Barnes and Senator John Kerry were never able to lay a hand on him while he was at the NSC. It would be the exposure of the administration's secret diplomacy with Iran and the diversion of arms profits to

the *contras* that would ultimately bring about his downfall.

## "THE BOYS DOWN SOUTH"

For the Reagan administration, the war against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua was an obsession. North and many of his colleagues believed that the "poison of communism," long confined to Cuba in this hemisphere, had finally reached the American mainland, and unless it was excised, it would corrupt all the nations in the region.

CIA chief Bill Casey passionately thought that it was enough for the United States to win one nation back from the Soviets in order to start an avalanche that could bring down the Soviet empire.

President Reagan and a number of other senior administration officials shared Casey's commitment to finding the Soviet Achilles' heel. No one was more committed to the Reagan doctrine than Oliver North, and if Casey was the architect of the policy, North was its sword.

"What we are facing in Central America and in Nicaragua," contended North, "is much more than just a regional crisis. We are fighting for our ability to survive and to prevent another world war." North never hid his support for the *contras*, and made only a minimal effort to hide his role in providing them with weapons, intelligence, and supplies. His role was widely known around Washington, and many people were given glimpses of his operation from time to time. It was not unusual to be sitting in his office in the Old Executive Office Building and to hear Fawn Hall interrupt him with an urgent phone call from "the boys down south." North would occasionally admonish the visitor to "forget everything you're about to hear," and then, without hesitation, pick up the telephone and bark commands to his field operators in Central America. One of them joked that North had come to be known as "Mr. Sir" because whenever he got a call from North, the field operator's end of the conversation went something like: "Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Affirmative, sir. Right, sir. Okay, good-bye, sir."

From his office, which served as a kind of command and control center for the *contra* war, North would be patched through to creaky prop-driven planes overflying Central America and dropping supplies and arms: "Echo, Charlie. This is Tango One. Where are you?" North's transformation into a master of an army in the field, like some nineteenth-century adventurer, left many of his friends and journalistic acquaintances almost speechless.

As he was liked and admired by most of those who knew him, there was also

concern as to where his mandate originated, or whether he had a mandate at all. He often was asked, "Who gave you the authority to carry out these operations?" The answer was always the same: "You don't believe I would be doing this without authority, or without proper clearances, do you?" Sometimes he would add, "The President knows every move I make." It was hard to believe that anyone at the White House could be oblivious to North's activities.

North was simply the most visible *contra* supporter, beyond the President.

*North never hid his support for the contras, and made only a minimal effort to hide his role in providing them with weapons, intelligence, and supplies. His role was widely known around Washington.*

at the White House. Despite the congressional ban on aid to the *contras*, many officials at the White House and the CIA played continuous and uninterrupted roles in developing and supporting the *contra* army, and as a part of this process maintained secret but intimate ties with the FDN (Front for Democratic Nicaragua) and its political and military leaders.

In reality, according to one high-ranking Reagan-administration official, "It was a CIA-run operation from day one." From the very beginning, the CIA had full control over the *contras*' military operations, budget, political alignments, and quartermastering.

"Without CIA authorization, the *contras* could not carry out one mission," maintained the official.

Even before the Boland Amendment, the CIA had faced a major problem: What had started out as a relatively small guerrilla band had mushroomed into a major military and political movement, compelling the agency to search for a new mechanism to oversee a covert operation that was no longer covert. In a sense, the CIA's problems were a result of its success.

Bill Casey in particular had grand designs. "He saw this as a great opportunity . . . not so much for the agency but for the Reagan ideology," explains one CIA official who believed that Casey hoped the *contras* would one day topple the Sandinista regime. From the outset the *contras* received mixed signals from Washington, which sowed confusion

and distrust within the movement.

During the three years that the CIA managed the *contra* operation, the agency spent between \$60 million and \$80 million to train and build up the force. Once Congress compelled the CIA to abandon the *contras*, control was passed to the National Security Council, and North was the point man. Initially, the NSC sought to maintain an appropriate distance from the operational needs of the movement, but North and his White House superiors could not long remain indifferent to pleas for help from the US-created army, which was sweating and dying on the field.

First came requests for money, and North responded by using his offices as a White House staffer to encourage wealthy Americans to contribute to the *contra* cause. In this, he was assisted by the President and other White House officials. No NSC staffer, however clever, could have collected millions of dollars for the *contra* cause from nations like Saudi Arabia, Brunei, South Korea, and Taiwan without the unambiguous support of top White House officials.

Soon the *contras* were in need of weapons and ammunition, and once again North used his position at the White House, approaching arms dealers with close ties to the CIA and the Defense Department and keeping his superiors informed each step of the way. Not only did he directly approach Mrs. Thatcher for the British-built blowpipe missiles needed by the *contras* to counter the threat from Soviet Mi-24 gunships, but he helped them purchase small arms and ammunition directly from Eastern Bloc nations. None of this would have been possible without the support and backing of the President and CIA Director Casey. None of the arms and materiel would ever have reached the *contra* camps along the Rio Coco if there had been the slightest doubt by anyone that North's activities were sanctioned by higher-ups.

## THE POLISH TRAIN ROBBERY

North's most audacious effort to supply arms to the *contras* involved the outlawed Polish trade union Solidarity. Because the Sandinistas were almost entirely outfitted with Soviet-made and Eastern Bloc weapons, emphasis was placed on supplying the *contras* with similar weapons. It was believed that providing the *contras* with American-made weapons would focus too much attention on the US supply link, not to mention that Soviet-made weapons are generally more simple to operate and could use captured ammunition.

After being turned down by the Israelis, North went to the CIA and, using



*Dr. Jonas Savimbi, leader of the Angolan "freedom fighters," came to Washington last year and appeared with Oliver North and Neil Livingstone (left), a counter-terrorism expert.*

CIA connections, made contact with a French businessman, Glenn Souham, who had close ties to Solidarity. Souham assisted North in opening a channel to the Solidarity underground.

Souham reportedly served as an adviser to the White House Advisory Council on Private Sector Initiatives and is alleged to have met with North on several occasions and with President Reagan at least once. His meeting with Reagan was as part of a group of businessmen who had traveled to Grenada in the wake of the US invasion. Souham was shot to death in September 1986 in front of his Paris apartment, at the moment his father, the head of a well-known European public-relations firm, was in Washington meeting with White House officials. There is speculation that Souham was murdered by Eastern Bloc agents because of his activities as a White House channel to Solidarity.

Solidarity leaders promised to help North and turned to their supporters in the Polish railway union. Using false documents provided by North and the CIA, a train loaded with Soviet arms intended for the Polish Army, including AKM assault rifles and SA-7 missiles, was diverted from a Polish pier to East Germany. From East Germany, the arms were smuggled into West Germany after bribes were paid by Western agents to local officials, and subsequently shipped to *contra* warehouses in Honduras. The operation lasted for two weeks, during which members of Solidarity risked their lives. To reroute the train to East Germany, it had been necessary at times to hide it at remote stations and on isolated railroad sidings.

Despite the money and weapons, the *contras* didn't emerge as a real threat to the Sandinista regime. In late 1984 and 1985, *contra* leaders blamed their inactivity on resupply problems. "We are

able to fly into Nicaragua for a supply drop only when the weather is too bad for the Sandinista pilots to take off," said Juan Gomez, a former National Guard pilot and *contra* officer, "but not so bad that it will force us to ground our planes. Many times we fail to establish radio contact with the drop zone. Our people are either on the run from the Sandinistas or simply did not make it."

North stepped in to reorganize the resupply effort. He brought in Southern Air Transport to run the operation. Southern established a Panamanian company to operate the C-123s that would be used. The C-123 was quicker than the C-47s used by the *contras* and could avoid radar detection by flying very low.

In August 1985, the new operation was launched and quickly became more reliable. As the operation was run as a covert enterprise, the manifests had to be rewritten in order to satisfy the Federal Aviation Administration and not arouse suspicion. The Central American countries needed flight manifests that would enable them to claim ignorance.

The amount of paperwork required to mask the mission when the planes traveled to Dulles International Airport to pick up military supplies was immense. In addition to manifests, landing rights, and other paperwork, the pilots needed detailed maps of the regions over which they would be working, up-to-date intelligence on Nicaraguan air-defense systems, and current weather reports. As the supply runs were routinely done on a twice-weekly basis, the amount of planning and support needed could not have been done without considerable assistance from within the US government.

When one of the supply planes, a C123K with an American crew, was shot down on October 5, 1986, it presaged the beginning of the end for the

secret *contra* resupply effort run out of North's office. A former Marine Corps paratrooper and ex-CIA employee, Eugene Hasenfus, the plane's cargo "kicker," survived and was put on trial in Managua. Hasenfus described the resupply team based at Illopango, including two Cuban-Americans who he indicated had CIA connections. He even suggested that the effort had the personal sanction of Vice President George Bush. The downing of the cargo plane and revelations from Hasenfus set off a firestorm of controversy.

Just as the controversy was beginning to die down, more sensational revelations followed in the wake of an article published in *Al-Shiraa*, a weekly magazine published in Moslem West Beirut, concerning clandestine American dealings with Iran and allegations that the US was swapping arms for hostages.

## CRACKUP

Late Monday afternoon, November 24, 1986, a grim-faced Attorney General Edwin Meese went to the White House to report on the Justice Department's investigation into reports that the United States had secretly shipped arms to Iran. Meese had been summoned to brief his long-time friend Ronald Reagan.

Meese told the President not only that some arms had been shipped to Iran, but that as much as \$30 million in profits from the arms sales had been diverted to fund the *contras*, despite the congressional prohibition on all US aid. The action, according to Meese, had apparently been engineered by members of the National Security Council, with the full knowledge of national-security adviser John Poindexter. Reagan assured Meese that he had not been aware of the covert funneling of money to the *contras* or of any details of the Iranian-arms transfers.

Oliver North had no idea that he was about to be fired. He knew that his tour of duty on the National Security Council was over, but being fired was something else. On the morning of November 25, the mood in his new office, overlooking the South Lawn of the White House, was one of calm resignation to his impending departure. Only Fawn Hall, who was crying bitterly, betrayed the emotion that everyone felt that morning. North's other secretary, Barbara Brown, who normally served as file clerk and backed Hall up, was handling the five-line telephone.

Sometime after 10 AM, one of North's close friends, a former Marine officer, walked into the office, unaware of the unfolding events. He found North cool and collected, working at his desk and packing his personal belongings.

"How you doing, pal?" he asked. □

"Fine, fine," North responded. As his friend took a seat, North informed him that he had been told to prepare for his abrupt departure from the NSC staff and that the President would soon appear on national television in connection with the Iran-contra affair. "From the moment I walked into his office until I left, much after noontime, the phone rang constantly," recalls North's friend. Among those who called were North's mother and his wife.

"Everything was in order and under control, and he was looking forward to his next assignment," the friend says.

Barbara Brown was not putting through most of the calls from journalists, most of whom were simply looking for a quote from North. Others, like Diane Sawyer from CBS, called to offer their help and support, as did many others from the CIA, the Defense Department, and even State. "I don't recall any phone calls from the President or the Vice President or other top-ranking administration officials," says the friend. "But aside from the top guys, everybody called either to say good-bye, to offer help, or just to have a quick chat with a colleague in need."

While North, between telephone calls, gathered up his mementos and put his desk in order, he and his friend reminisced about their days in the Marines, trips they had taken abroad together, and mutual acquaintances.

"I know you, North," concluded the friend, looking for something positive to say. "This is not the end, but for you it is just a new beginning."

As they spoke, North's office was slowly filling up with people: Hall, Brown, Lieutenant Colonel Bob Earl, Commander Craig Coy, and former CIA and NSC staffer Vince Canistraro. Earl and Coy sat at the conference table while North's friend, the former Marine officer, was seated in a chair opposite North's desk.

Hall was composed by now, and she and Brown were rushing in and out of the room to handle the endless stream of telephone calls. North was behind his desk, tense and alert, waiting to hear what the President had to say.

There was no sense of panic, or of an unfolding tragedy. Rather the mood was one of transition, of the passing of an era. North continued to shuffle the papers on his desk in a distracted fashion, as if forcing himself to stay busy, while the media were assembling in the White House press room. As they waited for the President to appear, he began to talk about the things he had tried to accomplish—in Central America and against international terrorism—and spoke sadly about his failures and unfinished agenda.

"Ollie was completely convinced that

he had never deliberately broken the law," observes his friend. "But he was deeply concerned that in the end he had not served his President well."

Sometime during the long wait, North's attorney called, and after a brief conversation North asked him to come over to his office. Hall once again became emotional. While expressing the fear to those assembled that "they" would try to crucify him, North never indulged in self-pity. His only thoughts

*Finally, the President came on the television, and North learned that, far from being transferred to a new assignment while the dust cleared, he had been fired, summarily dismissed.*

were for the President, whom he had served with loyalty and conviction.

Finally, the President came on the television and North learned that far from being transferred to a new assignment while the dust cleared, he had been fired, summarily dismissed.

He was stunned. No one had told him, or even given him a heads-up. He was now an outsider, and if he was not careful it was evident that the President's handlers had already decided to cast him overboard in an attempt to see if it would satisfy the circling sharks. While no one mentioned the word, everyone in North's office was thinking scapegoat.

Sometime later, North's lawyer showed up and the little gathering adjourned to permit North to confer in private with his attorney. The whole nature of the drama had changed in an instant; lawyers were now a very big part of his life.

Oliver North, the Marine, the fighter, was now engaged in what would surely become the most intense and compelling fight of his life—a fight for his reputation, his honor, his sense of what was right. In the months ahead he would be portrayed as everything from a thick-headed Marine with "tunnel vision" to a crazed, Vietnam-scarred special operator running amok throughout the world. The Senate/House hearings would reveal that he had cashed nearly \$2,500 in traveler's checks given to him by *contra* leader Adolfo Calero at such locations as supermarkets and gas stations, thus calling into question his integrity and honesty.

No one present in North's office on November 25 could know the magnitude



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of the crisis or where it would lead, but one thing was certain: Things would never be the same for any of them again.

## OLIVER NORTH: THE LAST CAVALIER

Someone said that Oliver North did not belong to this century. He was a throw-back to an earlier, simpler time—an anachronism. One can imagine him leading a charge on a galloping stallion, waving his sword high over his head, more easily than one can picture him in the control room of the modern electronic battlefield, fighting with telephones and computers, drones and remote weapons.

President Reagan's former spokesman, Larry Speakes, says of North: "The thing with Ollie—I think he was a patriot; I think that's true. But I sometimes felt that he thought he was playing some kind of role, that he was watching a movie on the screen with himself the star in it."

There is little doubt that North had a swashbuckling self-image, but whether he ever lost touch with reality is open to question. There is an obvious irony in North as the star of Ronald Reagan's movie, played out not on the sound stages of Hollywood but on a global stage using real soldiers. The truth is more complex.

North was the quintessential romantic who always stood up for women, who could not look at an American flag without becoming misty-eyed. He had little patience for the pettiness and shallow vision of other men. He was a man who wanted to do great things in the pursuit of great ideals.

More than any other quality, it is his daring that one remembers most about North. His contempt for naysayers and the timid of heart was known to everyone; others would ask, "Why?" when a bold plan was put forward. North would ask, "Why not?"

It may be that North was not the kind of man who should have been given a sensitive position on the National Security Council and that the real fault lies with those who hired him and used him for so long.

"Do you know why we get along with him so well?" General Simhoni once observed. "It's because he is more of an Israeli than we Israelis."

It was true. North had the same romantic, audacious, pioneering spirit that is so identified as part of the Israeli character. Like the Israelis, he reveled in cutting corners, in improvising, in getting things done—damn the ruffled feathers and the hurt feelings. He had chutzpah, and along with it the kind of arrogance often attributed to the Israe-

lis, who have little time for excuses and failure.

In some respects, North's problems stemmed from his admiration of the Israelis and their methods. What North apparently never grasped was that the United States, a great power with global commitments, could not behave the same way that Israel, a tiny nation surrounded by enemies, routinely does.

He lacked, one must conclude, perspective. It was one thing for the Israelis to carry out high-risk, seat-of-the-pants

*North often boasted, in a quiet way, of his ability to strike up a rapport with terrorists and extremists. "I'm the only one who can talk to revolutionaries," he would say.*

operations or to strike back at their enemies with a damn-the-consequences attitude. It was another thing for the US to operate the same way.

North's powerful personality, and the depth of his convictions, attracted others to him, and those men became his informal network. Like a good combat officer, he never asked them to take risks that he was unprepared to take, and they repaid his concern for them with intense loyalty.

Yet despite his rigid personal standards and the machismo he radiated, North was surprisingly tolerant of others with different lifestyles and personal habits. He often boasted, in a quiet way, of his ability to strike up a rapport with terrorists and extremists. "I'm the only one who can talk to revolutionaries," he would say. While he despised everything they represented, there was something deep within him that empathized with them and their lonely struggles. Perhaps it was because revolutionaries are, at their most elemental, also romantics.

North found it convenient to use the services and skills of two gay men in raising funds for the *contras*, without any jokes or comments regarding their proclivities. For North, values came first; if you were on the right side, for the right reasons, he could forgive a lot.

On the other hand, no matter how distinguished an individual's service record or contributions, if North perceived he was injuring the nation through his support of wrong-headed policies or just plain stupidity, he could not forgive him.

North was never a consensus man; the truth was not something to be brokered—it was an absolute. Perhaps it was because of his righteous certitude that he felt so little trepidation in getting down in the gutter and slugging it out with the scum bags of the world; North possessed an almost mystical certainty that he would never be tainted, that the filth would never rub off on him.

While North could be a charmer to those outside government, to those inside he was often a terror. He was not cowed by rank or position, and he regularly walked over or pushed aside those he regarded as impediments to carrying out the President's will. His real ability was as a mover and shaker, the man who could get things done. It was his ability to deliver when others could not that permitted him to amass so much power.

For the past six years there was no one at Langley, Foggy Bottom, or the Pentagon in a senior position who did not know that North operated under the presidential shield. He had the President's personal protection and support, and no one dared oppose him. Despite the Secretary of State's animosity toward North, he walked carefully around him, never taking him on directly. North even met with foreign leaders, highly unorthodox for an NSC staffer, and all assumed that he represented the President of the United States. A note from North opened doors in Honduras, even to the presidential mansion, and as the Tower Commission reported, he was so certain of his position that he was unafraid to threaten the President of Costa Rica on the telephone.

Oliver North was created by the frustration that every President since Kennedy has felt in trying to move the government. Without exception, they have complained of the intransigence of the federal bureaucracy and meddling by Congress in areas normally reserved for the executive. That the National Security Council became operational under Ronald Reagan is not in question. But the blame is not Reagan's alone. A bloated federal bureaucracy incapable of moving to protect American citizens and national interests from terrorism is also to blame. By mandating extensive oversight of covert operations, Congress made it inevitable that the administration would find a way of avoiding oversight requirements. The result was an operational NSC and a network of private contractors.

While he lasted, North gave flesh and blood to the Reagan doctrine and passion to the war against terrorism. In a world beset by enemies, the United States will be less secure without him. □